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# Performing the Nation: China's Children as Little Red Pioneers

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## **Abstract**

*The Little Red Pioneers, the Chinese Communist Party's organization for children aged 7–12, seem anachronistic in China today. This article argues that the Pioneer organization, rather than being an outdated relic of the nation's Maoist past, provides insight into contemporary Chinese nationalism, particularly the theoretical question of how children are produced as national subjects. Based in Butler's concept of performativity, this article argues that children's nationalism in China is performed through daily activities and practices structured by the Little Red Pioneers. [Keywords: China, communism, nationalism, performance theory, Little Red Pioneers]*

As the International Children's Day holiday approached at the end of May in 2001, excitement was building at the Pine Street Elementary School, a small, working-class school of around 350 students in northwestern Beijing.<sup>1</sup> That year, the sixty first-graders at Pine Street had been selected to participate in a ceremony at Tiananmen Square, where, along with several thousand other children, their induction into the Little Red Pioneers—the Chinese Communist Party's formal organization for children aged 7 to 13—would be broadcast to the entire nation via the national state-owned television network.

Since the 1950s, China has celebrated International Children's Day on June 1st as a day of games, songs, and presentations at school, and special treats at home. And since the beginning of the reform era, roughly the early 1980s, June 1st has also been designated for holding the ceremonies to induct the nation's first-graders into the Little Red Pioneers. Because 2001 marked the 50th anniversary of the Pioneer organization, Ministry of Education officials decided to note the occasion by televising a mass induction of first-graders at Tiananmen Square, something that had never been attempted before. Being chosen to participate in the celebrations was considered quite an honor by the Pine Street School teachers and their students, and with much excitement plans were made to have the children dressed in their school uniforms and on buses before dawn, so that they would be lined up on Tiananmen in time for the early morning ceremony.

On the evening of June 1st, International Children's Day, I rushed home to watch the broadcast of that morning's ceremonies. But neither the national nor local news had coverage of the Tiananmen ceremonies, nor did the special children's variety shows later in the evening. Frantically flipping stations, I found some coverage of Children's Day festivities elsewhere in China, but nothing from Beijing.

Astonished that the children's induction, which they had been looking forward to for weeks, did not make it on to television, the following Monday morning I went looking for Teacher Li, one of Pine Street School's first-grade teachers, to find out what happened.

"Oh, what a mess," she sighed. "I was so exhausted it took me all weekend to recover." According to her description, it took several hours to get the thousands of first-graders<sup>2</sup> lined up across Tiananmen Square; by then it was mid-morning and the temperature was already above 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

Teacher Li said:

“The television producers wanted all the children to look and act alike, but the kids weren’t disciplined enough. They were supposed to all be standing, but one would get tired and sit down and then everyone around them would sit down too. And they weren’t supposed to wear their school hats, but it was so hot that some did to protect their heads from the sun, but then they didn’t all look alike.”

“So the TV cameras didn’t film anything at all?” I asked.

“Oh, they tried. But Communist Party officials made speeches for hours. The children were really bored, and the cameras couldn’t get reaction shots when the kids weren’t either yawning or talking or crying. So the television people ended up not using anything they filmed. They were pretty pissed off (*fannao le*).”

She then added: “After the speeches the people in charge decided to take all the children through Chairman Mao Memorial Hall.<sup>3</sup> Can you imagine how long it took to line up 10,000 seven-year-old kids to go through one building?”

Teacher Li then took me to her classroom so that I could talk with her first-graders directly about their experience. When I asked how they felt about entering the Pioneers, one said:

“I was so excited about entering the Pioneers and going to Tiananmen, I woke my parents that morning at 4:00 a.m.”

Others reminded me that although they were happy and excited, once they were lined up on Tiananmen Square, it was all very difficult (*tebie nanshou*). None of the children were allowed to drink any water (because there are no bathrooms available on the Square); as a result, they were hot, thirsty, and even a little dizzy.

“I wanted to cry,” said one child, “but I tried not to.”

“Well,” another admitted, “I did cry. I was really hot and thirsty.”

“So,” Teacher Li asked, “did any of you regret going?”

“NO!” was the resounding response. They clamored to tell me: “Entering the Pioneers is an honor! Once we took the pledge to enter the Pioneers I forgot about hot and thirsty I was!”

“What did you think of Chairman Mao’s Memorial?” Li then asked.

Most of the children agreed: “It was great.” Why? “Because it was out of the sun.” Teacher Li had to think about that for a minute; it was not the answer she was looking for, but she obviously silently agreed with them.

“But how did you feel about seeing Chairman Mao?” I asked.

“It was a little scary,” one child said.

“Why?” I asked, wondering what she might have learned about Mao to make him a frightening figure. In response, she gave me an exasperated, “adults-ask-such-stupid-questions” look.

“Because,” she said, rolling her eyes, “he’s *dead*.”

Yet others were particularly honored by the opportunity, because, they told me, Chairman Mao had “kicked the butts” of the Japanese devils (*ta da le Riben guizi*) during the anti-Japanese war; to demonstrate, several children jumped out of their seats and gleefully showed me moves copied from Hong Kong kungfu movies. Here Teacher Li rolled her eyes, sighed deeply, and intervened:

“Boys and girls, Chairman Mao founded the New China. He led our Liberation Army to defeat the Japanese and the imperialists. Your grandparents will never forget this and will always love him.”

The children, somewhat chastised, agreed.

“It was a great honor to see him,” one child responded. “And my parents said they were very proud of me, even if they couldn’t see me on TV.”

This story seems to describe an anomaly wrapped in an anachronism: a state spectacle never seen by the public, conducted by children living in a capitalist economy who vow loyalty to communism and to the Chinese Communist Party. This paper looks at the Little Red Pioneer system in urban China today, to argue both that the organization is *not* an anachronistic holdover from the socialist era, and that a close study of children’s daily activities as Pioneers provides privileged insight into the nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism. This article argues for a performative approach to nationalism, which, I suggest, augments our understanding of the ways that children are produced as nationalist subjects, and which outlines the changing contexts for participation in the contemporary Chinese nation.

An approach based in performativity helps us understand both the presumed contradiction in this story—capitalist children vowing loyalty to the Communist Party—and the supposed “failure” of the children to perform appropriately for the television cameras. There are, of course, apparently simple answers to both of these issues: loyalty vows are required by the totalitarian state, while these children, only 7 years-old, are simply too young to perform the bodily disciplines appropriately. Yet

I argue that there is more to this “failed” performance than a poor match between assigned tasks and children’s capabilities or that it is merely an example of the state’s power to muster demonstrations in its honor; instead, this example indicates how nationalism is not (only) something that children acquire through the state-based institution of Chinese public schools (cf. Althusser 1971), but is something that they *do* through repetitive daily activities (Butler 1990; 1993). As I will discuss below, children’s nationalism requires repeated performances, reiterations of an ideal that can never be entirely achieved (Butler 1993). At the same time, the norms for performances of nationalism are constantly changing in the context of China’s rapid social and economic changes, rendering them impossible to achieve fully. Every reiteration of nationalism has the potential to “fail” in some way, which requires further reiterations. A close study of how children in particular are being prepared as national subjects through performativity elucidates the unattainability of the ideal, as well as the compulsion to continue reiterating the norms of nationalism during rapid social transformation.

### **Accounting for Nationalism**

Many different theories have been proposed to explain how national subjects and subjectivities are formed, including through sharing print media and the development of print capitalism (Anderson 1983), shared language (Handler 1988; Golden 2001), state-sponsored clubs and other institutions (Bowie 1997), and commemorative activities (Connerton 1989). Others have also looked more broadly at the daily life of the nation (Navaro-Yashin 2002), including the “banal nationalism” of daily practice (Billig 1995), and the politics and poetics of collective identity (Herzfeld 1997).

These works have two broad features in common. First, in spite of predictions of the end of the nation in today’s globalizing world, these works agree that “rumors of the death of the nation have been greatly exaggerated” (Aretxaga 2003:393; Chalfin 2006). While some scholars have argued that the nation-state form is weakening, as borders are challenged by transnational corporations, NGOs and other transnational organizations, as well as cross-border flows of people, material, and global consumer society, the nation and nationalism are “still alive and kicking” at the turn of the 21st century (Weiss 2002:37). The point, then, is to account for continuing—and growing—nationalism in this increasingly global age.

Accounting for contemporary nationalism is a particular challenge in China today, where nationalism is an extremely potent force. Observers<sup>4</sup> generally agree that the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has deployed nationalism strategically, as a way to retain legitimacy after abandoning socialist ideology and embracing capitalism. As one scholar notes, “Chinese communism is turning to nationalism to legitimate one-party rule” (Chang 1998:83). Today the Communist Party posits itself as the vanguard of the Chinese *nation*—not the proletariat—and as the privileged agent to carry forward the Chinese nation’s long-deferred dream of wealth, power, and international respect (see Zhao 1998). This has led many western analysts to assume that Chinese nationalism is therefore a top-down phenomenon: because the CCP uses nationalism as the grounds of its political legitimacy, the Party imposes nationalist sentiment on the Chinese people.

More recent research, however, acknowledges that this analysis is simplistic, and notes instead that “popular nationalism” in China cannot be explained as solely the effect of top-down Party ideology. By the late 1990s, most scholars agreed that Chinese nationalism was not “the sole province of state propaganda and intellectual discourse” (Zhao 2004:11), but is instead a potent combination of popular sentiment, state authority, and intellectual approval (Guo 2004).

The question remains, however, as to precisely how nationalism is understood, experienced, and generated by people in their everyday lives. There is extensive and fascinating historical work on how the Chinese nation was socially and discursively produced in the early 20th century (Duara 1995; Fitzgerald 1996), and on the ways that nationalism was generated through a range of practices during the Republican Era (1911-1949) including consumption (Gerth 2003) and physical activity (Morris 2004). Much less of this kind of work, however, has been done in reform-era China.<sup>5</sup> This article is intended to contribute to this line of inquiry, arguing that the daily practices of the Little Red Pioneers provide a particularly powerful site from which to view the complex links between the CCP and the nation’s children, thus illuminating a central question in China today: how Chinese nationalism is lived and experienced within the context of the many contradictions of the reform era.

The second broad theme that anthropological theories of nationalism have in common is that they are predicated on the theory that nations are imagined communities (Anderson 1983) rather than contemporary reflections of primordial allegiances (e.g., Huntington 1996). The study of chil-

dren and children's nationalism is, from this perspective, particularly important, because all nations must in some way teach children how to imagine themselves as members of a national community.

Most scholars who address these questions start with inquiries into formal education, which is "ubiquitously cited as the main motor of nationalism and the source of patriotic allegiance" (Bryant 2001:583). Bryant notes that this tendency "goes back at least to Durkheim's later works on the nation-state, which had heralded formal education as the ritual *par excellence* for the socialization of the youth in what he called 'moral culture'" (ibid; Durkheim 1956; 1973). Anderson's (1983) work on the nation as imagined community continued in this vein, positing classrooms as a privileged site for developing the social bonds among classmates that transcended parochial village loyalties and made national collectivities possible.

From this position have come studies of classrooms as incubators of nationalist sentiment, and of textbooks as materializations of state ideology. Studies of textbooks that are produced by national educational ministries can indeed be mined to understand how states (or agents of the state) understand their own histories, how some events are remembered or forgotten, and how changing curricular material reflects changing politics (e.g., Grinker 1998, Culp 2001, Hein and Selden 2000). If states exist only as reifications (Abrams 1988, Aretxaga 2003), then textbooks and other school materials can provide particularly good evidence to show how the state is reifying itself.

One example of how seriously states take textbooks and classrooms as incubators of nationalist sentiment is China's ongoing scrutiny of the ways that Japanese textbooks portray the Japanese invasion of China (see e.g. Reilly 2004). This concern—and the political controversies that arise from it—is based on the assumption that what is taught in schools structures what children—and, later, adults—can understand about their nations and histories. At the same time, the CCP has employed its own attempts to raise patriotism through educational interventions, such as the patriotic education campaign launched after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, which was designed to teach Chinese children that Western objections to China's crackdown on protesters were anti-Chinese, not anti-Communist (Zhao 2004).

This classroom- and textbook-based approach is extremely useful, and sheds light on the ways that schools as state apparatuses (cf. Althusser 1971) attempt to produce children as national subjects. But as the many



studies of nationalism have shown, the nation is also lived and experienced as part of everyday life. How can we understand the ways that children become nationalist subjects through practices beyond reading textbooks? If we accept Connerton's (1989) claim that national identity is embodied, and that the nation is incorporated in its members, what kind of embodied practices are producing children as national subjects? It is in this context that I suggest that the concept of performativity offers new insight into nationalism and national subjects.

### **Performing the Nation**

Strongly influenced by Judith Butler's work (1990, 1993), performativity theory has developed to describe the processes by which gender identities are constructed in and through discourses of sexuality (Morris 1995:569). For Butler, gender is neither an essence nor a biological given, but is instead a "consequence of the enactment of social norms" (Schein 1999:369). Building on Austin's (1975) linguistic theories that some utterances are performative in that they *do* something rather than describe or express something, Butler argues that gender is something that is *enacted*, rather than being a culturally and historically specific expression of a pre-existing biological state. Gender is thus not something one *has*, but rather is something one *does*, through "the stylized repetition of acts through time." (Butler 1990:141).

Repetition is central to performativity, for gendered subjects are brought into being not through single acts, but only through reiterations of social norms. In this way, performativity is linked to the disciplinary and normalizing strategies described by Foucault (1977) that establish and respond to categories of the normal and the pathological (Lloyd 1999:196), for Butler proposes that gender is an effect of power secured through the repeated performance of norms that produce the effect of coherent substance (Butler 1990:145; Feldman 2005). In this way, "gender is not an inner core or static essence, but a reiterated enactment of norms, ones that produce, retroactively, the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth" (Butler 1997:14, cited in Mahmood 2001).

Thus, according to Butler, gender performances do three things. First, they construct the gendered subject, who has "no ontological status apart from those acts that constitute its reality" (Butler 1993:173). Because there is no essence or origin outside the enactment of multiple perform-

ances, the gendered subject is brought into being through these performances. Butler thus rejects the idea that an autonomous agent authors performative utterances, and disavows a voluntarist subject who chooses his or her gender (Lloyd 1995:199). Second, repeated performances of the normative conceal gender's lack of a stable essence or foundation, by "sustaining the idea that biological sex precedes gender." (Feldman 2005:221). Butler asserts that "bodily gestures, movements and styles constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (1990:139). There is thus no *a priori* sexed subject who learns gender roles; instead, the subject him/herself is constituted through performances. Third, gendered performances are compelled to be repeated, because performances can never fully approximate the socially and historically generated norms of gender (Butler 1993).

Anthropologists have extended this theoretical perspective beyond gender, to look at other aspects of performativity. Feldman (2005) argues that state power can be seen as performative: the state, rather than being an enduring and pre-constituted entity, is instead produced through the performance of difference. Schein (1999; 2000) argues that modernity is at least partly constituted as a performance, through negotiations of cultural politics by members of the Miao minority group in China. Mahmood (2001) uses performativity to investigate the agency of Egyptian women and their veiling practices today.

The concept of performativity can also be usefully extended to help us think about the construction of children as national subjects, and the ways that nationalism is *performed* in some of the same ways that gender is. From this perspective, nationalism is understood as something children *do*, not something they *acquire*. It thus takes us beyond state-sponsored textbooks and propaganda, and focuses instead on children's daily lives to inquire how and where the nation is performed. These performances may include reading textbooks, but also a range of other daily activities.

Performativity also helps us re-think the agency of the child as national subject. Rather than being an *a priori* subject onto which the nation is either forced (through propaganda) or chosen (by children who elect to become patriotic), an approach based in performativity argues that the child is instead constituted as a national subject through repetitive performances of the nation. In other words, a cognitive theory of nationalism presupposes an *a priori* child who is then imbued with nationalist sentiment through the institutional vehicle of schools. Yet rather than

positing the child as a pre-national subject who learns what it means to be part of a nation through cognitively-based material and then chooses his or her national identity, a performative analysis argues that part of the maturation process for contemporary children entails repeated performances of the nation, which then, over time, constitute the child as a national subject. Thus in looking at children's performances, we can more clearly see nationalism as a convention, a set of norms about being Chinese that both precede and constrain children.

This then raises an ethnographic question: what kinds of performances are normative in different societies today? Following Connerton (1989), what are the embodied forms of collective memory and social practice? How might these differ from or extend "inscribed" practices based in text? My argument is that the *Chinese* child is produced through performances of the nation, which are embodied and habituated through repetition in daily life. Since performativity is "rooted within a matrix of discursive norms" (Diamond 1996:5), the following sections explore the Little Red Pioneers as the matrix of nationalism for Chinese children, and looks at the ways that Pioneer activities are performative acts, which "are part of regulatory practices that produce social categories and the norms of membership within them. They are sites where hegemonic definitions of the collective body relate to multiple injunctions of individual bodies" (Fortier 1999:43). Focusing on the daily practices of young children (ages 7-10) in Beijing, the following sections look at the Pioneers as a performance, where the social category of the Chinese nation is (re)produced through daily practices.

### **The Little Red Pioneers**

Although children are annually inducted into the Little Red Pioneers on or around International Children's Day on June 1st, the nationally-broadcast public performance in 2001 was highly unusual. The Pine Street School teachers explained that special ceremonies were called for that year, because 2001 marked the 50th anniversary of the formal Little Red Pioneer organization.<sup>6</sup> Modeled on a similar institution in the Soviet Union (Lane 1981), the Pioneers serve as the first Communist Party affiliation for Chinese children aged seven to thirteen; after that, qualified teenagers can apply for membership in the Communist Youth League (*Qingnian tuan*).

The goal of the Pioneers has long been to inculcate in children organizational and leadership skills, discipline, collectivism, obedience to Party

directives, and patriotism.<sup>7</sup> Through the 1970s Pioneer membership was highly competitive: in order to enter the organization, children had to prove their moral and political worthiness, as well as demonstrate that they came from an appropriate class background.<sup>8</sup> In fact, during the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976), a primary goal of the Pioneers was to teach children how to recognize and reject class enemies (Unger 1982).

By the time I arrived in China in the late 1990s, however, membership in the Pioneers was largely *pro forma*, and in Beijing virtually all children were automatically inducted into the organization upon finishing first grade. The only exceptions were those very few who either had not yet passed their seventh birthday by the end of the school year, or those for whom membership was postponed for a year as punishment for bad behavior in first grade. The teachers explained that the Pioneers' admission standards had been changed in order to avoid the bad feelings and rivalry among the children that competitive membership had sparked. In my experience, every first grader in the two elementary schools in which I conducted research in 1999-2001 entered the Pioneers on June 1st.

While the switch to automatic Pioneer induction meant that members no longer focus on identifying and excluding class enemies,<sup>9</sup> at the institutional level the Little Red Pioneer organization still has strong formal ties with the Chinese Communist Party. In Beijing, every elementary school's Pioneer cell is linked to the Communist Youth Organization in their local school district, and each school assigns at least one teacher to supervise Pioneer activities and report regularly to district-level Party authorities. Every semester, these authorities then specify curricular themes for home-room teachers to address each month with their students; in 2000, for example, these included activities to celebrate Macao's return to the Chinese Motherland at the end of the year, and to mark anniversaries of events in Communist Party history.

Using these assigned themes, Pioneers in the older grades (the fifth and sixth graders) are also responsible for designing and drawing murals on the large chalkboards on the back wall of every classroom. Between 1999-2001, when I conducted field work in two elementary schools in Beijing, themes for back-of-the-classroom blackboards included pictures of rocket ships with descriptions of China's space program, exhortations condemning Falun Gong,<sup>10</sup> essays and drawings about Macao and Hong Kong returning to the Motherland, and suggestions for how students could best emulate the selfless spirit of Lei Feng.<sup>11</sup> At one of my research field sites, an elite elemen-

tary school called University School that served children of faculty and staff at one of China's most prestigious universities, the school's Little Red Pioneer cell was also responsible for decorating the school's hallways. Every few months the elected Pioneer leaders in each classroom would collect essays by their classmates on these same themes, then select the best ones to display prominently on bulletin boards lining the school's hallways. One example that I found particularly striking was posted in the hallways in late October, 2000. The children had been assigned to write about their reactions to the annual National Day Parade in Tiananmen Square, held a few weeks earlier on October 1st. According to their posted essays, many of the University School children had attended the parade in person. In the essays, more than one child expressed: "I saw our Liberation Army march along Tiananmen Square while our leader Jiang Zemin watched. I especially liked seeing the weapons displayed. Seeing this makes me want to grow up to be a scientist, so that I can build better weapons to defend the Motherland." This is an excellent example of the ongoing production of social memory, in Connerton's (1989) sense: Children attend national commemorations, where, proudly sporting their red scarves, they stand at attention to recognize the nation's achievements, then inscribe their patriotic fervor in publicly-displayed essays. At the same time, these assigned essay themes also crossed content areas, as Party officials used the Pioneer system to build children's love of the nation, respect for Party history and ideological conformity with Party policies, as well as inculcating high modernist yearnings towards national development through science and technology.

Ideologically, the strong links between the Pioneers and the Communist Party are most clearly evinced during the annual International Children's Day celebrations, which, unlike the spectacle described at the beginning of this paper, usually take place within the confines of each elementary school. During these celebrations, Pioneer members carry and salute the national flag, take loyalty oaths to the Chinese Communist Party, and perform patriotic plays or soliloquies that they write themselves as paeans to the Party and the Chinese motherland. The climax of these performances is always the ritual tying of a red scarf around the neck of each of the first graders, to mark their entry into the Pioneers. This red scarf is a sacred symbol (Chan 1985; Unger 1982) that represents a corner of the national flag stained by the blood of the revolutionary martyrs; wearing it daily around their necks is supposed to symbolize a child's ties to the Party and the nation, and their remembrance

of those who died for the revolution. And, lest the younger children not fully understand this point, in the weeks leading up to Children's Day, the older children formally instruct the first graders in how to tie, wear, and appropriately respect the scarves they will soon receive (cf. Bowie 1997).

During initiation, children chant the Little Red Pioneer pledge:

"I am a Little Red Pioneer! Beneath the Pioneer flag I swear that I am determined to obey the teachings of the Chinese Communist Party, that I will study, work and labor diligently, and that I am prepared to dedicate all my efforts to the cause of communism."

The pledge is performative in Austin's (1975) sense: "an act of enunciation that brings into being the object it names" (Morris 1995:572). Children become Pioneers by declaring themselves so, and then repeat the pledge at regular Pioneer events during the school year, including celebrations for National Day and other major state holidays. Each child also wears a red scarf to school every day, thus reiterating their link to the nation through the Pioneers, and thereby performing the norms of national membership on a daily basis.

But these performances extend beyond the pledge and the red scarves, for children's subjectivity as Pioneers is also reiterated in the context of extensive structural links between schools and the CCP. Structurally, the Pioneer system in each school mirrors the hierarchical organization of the Party. Starting in second grade, the Pioneers in each homeroom class elect ranked leaders; in the older grades, teachers also elevate some children to school-wide Pioneer leadership positions. The rights and responsibilities of these various leadership positions vary in different schools. For example, University School had a special conference room dedicated to the Pioneer organization; it featured a huge mural of Chinese scientists planting the national flag in Antarctica, as well as posters with the text of the Pioneer anthem and pledge (see Figure 1). In the corner stood a large bust of Lei Feng. And, as I discovered one day when a teacher and I tried to use the room for a short meeting during the lunch hour, a cabinet in another corner of the room held a large color television. That day, we found the room full of the school's fifth- and sixth-grade Pioneer leaders, eating lunch and happily watching Japanese cartoons (dubbed into Chinese) via cable on the TV. The teacher in charge of University School's Pioneer activities later explained that this was one of the privileges of



**FIGURE 1: Little Red Pioneer meeting room at University School, showing a mural of Chinese scientists in Antarctica, and a bust of Lei Feng (back right corner). The slogan above the mural reads: “Be Prepared to Struggle to Achieve Communism!”**

being chosen as a high-ranked cadre at their school: having a special room and access to cartoons was one way to make these positions highly coveted among all the children. Not to mention, of course, that this was also an important lesson in the special privileges of Party-based power in China, and what children can expect when they become adults.

### **Pioneers and the Nation**

This reproduction of Party hierarchy and privilege, the ritual of bestowing of the red scarf, the performativity of the loyalty oaths and the children's swearing to dedicate themselves to the cause of communism all make it seem that membership in the Little Red Pioneers produces a direct and unmediated relationship between children and the Chinese Party-State. On the level of daily practice, however, the Little Red Pioneers operate much

more like a school-based youth group focused on Chinese patriotism, school spirit, and social service, than a system for turning young children into communist ideologues. In the daily life of elementary schools, the Pioneer system is a way to organize and discipline children, and a means of teaching them skills in both leadership and obedience. Most importantly, though, the Pioneer system manages and disciplines children's time and space (cf. Foucault 1977).

Decorating classrooms, washing the blackboard between classes, and sweeping and mopping the floors were all tasks assigned to the Little Red Pioneers, and which the children organized and completed daily, largely without adult intervention or supervision. Pioneers at University and Pine Street schools ran recycling drives, participated in tree-planting activities on the outskirts of the city, and organized visits to elderly shut-ins. The students at both schools spent long hours preparing for Pioneer-sponsored weekend competitions in chorus, band, exercise, track and field, calligraphy and other extra-curricular activities. Today, the Little Red Pioneers organization is the site of the inculcation of collectivist morality—no longer a collectivism that identifies and excludes class enemies, but a nationalist, social-service based collectivity. Thus, while at the level of slogans and organization the Pioneers are very explicitly part of the Communist party, in practice the system is largely de-politicized, or, perhaps more accurately, “de-socialist-ized.”

My fieldwork generated many examples of how this took place. During the International Children's Day and Pioneer induction celebrations at both Pine Street and University Schools, children's declarations of love for the Party and dedication to the goals of communism were mixed with other kinds of entertainment prepared by the same students. During ceremonies at both schools, I observed children performing choreographed disco dancing, displays of kungfu prowess, a fashion show, recitations of Tang Dynasty poetry, and arias from Chinese operas. The students themselves generally arranged the agendas (although the teachers were more involved in the more professionalized performances at the University School). They did not in any way mark the different performance registers, as they easily mixed styles, genres, and metaphors. International Children's Day is thus a kind of global *bricolage* by Beijing children, as they pick and choose elements from traditional high Chinese culture (Tang poetry), low culture (Peking opera and martial arts), global youth culture (albeit a few years out of date, judging by the American disco music chosen), and



Communist ideology. It is a fairly accurate representation, in fact, of their lives in contemporary Beijing, and of the constitution of contemporary Chinese nationalism: an ever-changing *bricolage* of communist ideology, pride in Chinese history and culture, and links to global modernity. The fact that the Children's Day celebrations now accommodate these different kinds of performances indicates the continuously changing norms for participation in the Chinese nation, as well as how children's performances constitute them as modern national subjects.

Another example of how Pioneer activities combined a range of practices was found on the blackboard-lined walls along the entranceway at Pine Street School. Every few weeks the Little Red Pioneer leaders of the school (in 5th and 6th grades), in consultation with the school's art teacher, designed and drew elaborate messages to the student body on these blackboards. One posted near the end of the semester taught students the appropriate bodily disciplines necessary to perform well on the upcoming end-of-term exams (see Figure 2). Titled "The end of the semester is here!" the picture showed children washing their hands before meals (to prevent sickness which would influence ability to study); children going to bed and getting up early; and illustrated the proper sitting position at a desk and the right position for a lamp so as to maximize studying effort and minimize eye strain. Two negative examples were also included: one, a child watching television until late at night; another of children eating unclean food from an itinerant sidewalk snack seller, which makes them too sick to study.<sup>12</sup> This Pioneer-sponsored didactic material shows the ways that the Pioneers are naturalized as part of daily bodily disciplines which produce the right kinds of bodies, which then produce morality via good study habits and good grades.

In fact, the Pioneer system is so deeply naturalized as the only possible means to inculcate appropriate behavior and to keep schools running by organizing children's time, that every teacher I met in Beijing at some point asked me to describe to them the workings of the Little Red Pioneer system in the United States. This question flustered me, but once I realized that they were not teasing me, I was at a loss of where to begin to explain the decentralized American educational system. More as a joke than an explanation, I finally resorted to reminding them that there is no Communist Party in the U.S. empowered to run such a system. Their response, however, was more puzzlement: even if a different political party ran the organization, surely some kind of equivalent system must



**FIGURE 2: Blackboard at entrance to Pine Street School. The caption reads: “The end of the semester is here!”**

exist. Otherwise, how were American children organized? How did they spend their free time? How were classrooms kept clean?

Pioneer activities are thus naturalized and repeated every day: children live the Pioneers and the Chinese nation through a series of embodied activities that they perform as national subjects. Their nationalism is inscribed not only through formal rituals, but through repeated daily practices that include wearing red scarves and swearing fealty to the Communist Party, and also recycling, cleaning classrooms, and learning disco dancing. Their induction, loyalty oaths, and red scarves are not an anachronism, but are the ways that children are performing and embodying nationalism, one inflected by Party history. At the same time, these practices are part of the contemporary moment, inscribing children into the capitalist moral economy. Party membership is directly linked to capitalist-style benefits (watching cartoons), while the Party organization for children has also become a place to teach the role of adults in the new, neoliberal moral order. Now

that the Chinese State has withdrawn from the social service sector and smashed the “iron rice bowl” that marked the Mao era, individuals must learn how to donate time, money and energy to society. Rather than building collectivism, as in the past, now the Party guides individualist interventions in the social field through social service.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, children and teachers assume that just as their lives reflect increasing global influences, these practices must be just as naturalized globally as they are in China. Since their performances of nationalism now incorporate elements from global youth culture, it makes sense for them to assume that other children's performances are similar to theirs.

Western observers are deeply vexed by the apparent contradiction of a Communist Party leading a capitalist economy. The ethnographic data above shows how this is not necessarily experienced as a contradiction in children's daily practices—not because they are subjected to tyrannical power which dictates what they must think and feel, but because they perform their membership in the Pioneers through activities that reflect the continuously changing norms for moral participation in the nation. Lauding the Communist Party is mixed with disco dancing; displays of rocket ships and Party heroes mix with adumbrations to eat right and get enough sleep. All are part of the daily performances under the purview of the Pioneers. The repetitions of Pioneer life are multiple, linked to the ways that the Party, via the Pioneers, is producing the nation and its future.

### **Fear of Water: Performance, Reiteration and “Getting it Wrong”**

On International Children's Day in 2000, in a ceremony with the University School first-graders and children from a dozen other schools in Haidian District in northwestern Beijing, I was inducted as an honorary member of the Little Red Pioneers. At the end of the ceremony a reporter from the local Haidian cable TV station interviewed some of the participants. Several teachers and I watched as the reporter held a microphone up to one of the seven-year-olds who was wearing his new red scarf, and asked him: “How do you feel?” The child stood up very straight, took a deep breath, and responded: “This is the happiest day of my life. Because. Because. Because....” He then turned to the reporter, shrugged his shoulders, and cheerfully admitted: “I forgot.” The reporter, teachers, and I all roared with laughter.

A similar story occurred one afternoon near the end of the school year in Spring, 2000. I was drawn to the fourth grade teachers' room<sup>14</sup> at Pine Street School one afternoon by the sound of a sudden howl of laughter. When I entered, one of the teachers, still chuckling, handed me a student's homework paper. The homework assignment was a worksheet that had been written by the Haidian District education authorities, that students were to complete as part of the preparations for their upcoming end-of-semester exams, which were standardized across the district. The worksheet read:

"I am sitting on a plane next to Grandma. I look out the window and watch the clouds and ocean below me. My heart races and my blood pounds. Soon I will be back in the Motherland. I enjoyed my time in the U.S. with Grandma and Grandpa. My classmates in America were kind to me, and before I left they even offered me to give me a new little red scarf. I declined, though, because I wanted to keep wearing the scarf that my classmates in Beijing had given me before I left. Oh—how exciting! The plane is touching down in Beijing! I stride down the gangway towards my waiting mother. 'Mama!' I announce proudly, 'I'm back!'"<sup>15</sup>

The first question on the homework worksheet read: "Why, when 'you' look out the window of the airplane, is 'your' heart racing and your blood pounding?" Virtually all of the fourth-grade students had responded correctly, "because I'm so excited about returning to the Motherland!" Yet two of the Pine Street fourth-grade students had instead answered: "Because I'm afraid of water!" For several weeks afterwards, this line could bring the teachers room to tears of laughter.

I recount these stories in order to return to the question raised at the beginning of this paper: how to understand the ways that children continue to "get it wrong," the many ways that they "fail" to perform the nation appropriately. Thousands of children on Tiananmen Square do not perform appropriately for the television cameras; some may forget why joining the Little Red Pioneers is "the most important day" of their short lives, while others confuse the nationalist lesson in a text with the problem of grammatical deixis.

There are two possible explanations for these mistakes: first, that they are developmental, that the children are simply too young to understand

what is expected of them or to carry out the bodily or intellectual disciplines required. Their tender age might also explain the teachers' and parents' reactions, the adults' tendency to laugh and see these failures as examples of kids "saying the darndest things." A second possibility is to see these "mistakes" as a form of children's resistance, a choice on their part to resist adults' disciplines, regulations, and imposed meanings of nationalism, and an effort to generate their own meaning of the nation.

I suggest, however, an alternative explanation, based in performativity. These "failures" in performances of nationalism occur because in China today, the nationalist ideal is always in some way unattainable. As Butler notes in her discussion of gender performances:

To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a "girl," however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment (Butler 1993:232).

In other words, gender performances never fully approximate the norm; therefore, additional reiterative performances are always compelled in order to continuously produce the gendered subject. If, as Lloyd claims, "gender performativity may be inevitable, but it is always open and incomplete" (Lloyd 1999:200), then the same may be true of children's performances of nationalism. These "failures," then, are an example of the ways that regimes of nationalism in China today do not "fully legislate or contain their own ideals" (*ibid.*), making the ideal unattainable. Nationalism is an ever-changing mix of the socialist past, the glories of "traditional" Chinese culture, and global consumerism; therefore, no performance can ever contain or embrace all aspects. Further performances of the nation are always necessary.

In this respect, the fact that the ideal is unattainable—and the ways that children strive, but sometimes fail, to perform the nation appropriately—tells us something important about nationalism in contemporary China. The many elements in the *bricolage* of contemporary children's

lives, including the socialist, capitalist, consumerist, and global, are not experienced as contradictory or mutually exclusive; instead, they come together to produce children as Chinese subjects, embedded in the complexity of the contemporary world. Thus the puzzle that vexes many Western observers of China—how a capitalist economy can be run by a communist party—is no puzzle at all to the children inducted into the Little Red Pioneers. Their practices of nationalism include paeans of loyalty to the Communist Party, consumption of Japanese cartoons as a “privilege” of Party rank, and disco dancing. They are caught in a regime of childhood that is both so highly naturalized and so linked to the global consumer market, that education officials can write homework essays about *American* children’s wearing of red Pioneer scarves. These come together in a not-quite-seamless whole, reiterated every day.

At the same time, it is important to note that adults’ reaction to these “failed” performances is laughter. Not all “mistakes” by children are treated so lightly by adults; even errors that can clearly be attributed to their youth, such as math or grammar mistakes on school assignments, or incorrect moral stances in their interactions with others, are vigorously corrected by adults (Woronov, n.d.). Yet I suggest that there are so few repercussions for these “failed” performances of nationalism because in the many other reiterations of nationalism, children’s performances are so successful. Even at age 7, the children I knew were deeply patriotic. They may not always get the details correctly, and the regulation and discipline are still being worked out, but by age 7 these children had already been produced as Chinese subjects through their repeated performances. This is not surprising: in Butler’s scheme, 7-year-old children are fully aware if they are boys or girls, and understand the norms of gendered performances, even as their daily lives require on-going reiterations of gender. In China, children know that they are subjects of the Chinese nation, which they love dearly.

This leads to the second possible explanation for their “failed” performances, that of resistance. I have argued above against relying solely on a cognitive approach to nationalism, and suggest that like gender, nationalism is not a choice that children make, but instead performed as the citation of a norm (Butler 1993). Like all subjects, children perform within the parameters that are open to them, which, I argue, are the ever-changing contexts of Chinese nationalism. Their personal views are rarely solicited or expressed in these contexts. During the Children’s Day cele-

brations they perform in spectacles that are highly scripted; contents of essays and themes for blackboards and coloring projects that line the halls of schools are not spaces for children to develop their individuality or learn how to work out the “meaning” of the nation. In this respect, areas where they “fail” are not sites of resistance to the norms of the nation, but instead are sign posts pointing to the wide range of practices that are possible as performances of the contemporary nation. In fact, asking the children directly about their patriotism leads to the same kind of incredulous eye-rolling I described at the beginning of the paper. “Of course we love the Motherland!” was the response I would invariably get to any question I was able to frame about their patriotism, a response usually accompanied by a snort of exasperation at the dumb questions foreigners ask. Or, as one child advised me: “You should come to the Children’s Day celebration at school. There you can see what we think.” Children’s mistakes in these performances—forgetting why entering the Pioneers is an honor, not performing for television cameras—does not challenge their fundamental patriotism, and does not express resistance on their part to the disciplines of the nation-state.

I therefore argue against a solely cognitive approach to children’s nationalism. Textbooks are important, and reading and memorizing the content of state-sponsored textbooks is one of the many ways that the nation is repeatedly performed in daily life. But the state is reified in many ways in their lives; in China, children’s connection with the nation-state extends to the Party-sponsored Little Red Pioneers. Children wear red scarves while disco dancing, recycling batteries, and imitating Hong Kong kungfu movies.

And, since children perform the nation in different ways than adults, they provide privileged insight into the performativity of the nation. Apart from the military, most adults are not required to wear a token of their patriotism everyday—such as a red scarf—nor do adults celebrate national holidays today by writing and performing skits, poems and dances of love for the Motherland. Children, however, still do, and expand our theories of nationalism in the process.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The names of all the schools and individuals have been changed. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Teacher Li said that there were “yiwan” children on the Square that day, which literally means “ten thousand,” but is often used colloquially in China to mean “an extremely large but unspecified number.” From her description, I assume that between 8 and 12 thousand children participated in this performance.

<sup>3</sup>Chairman Mao’s Memorial Hall is located near the south end of Tiananmen Square. Visitors to the Hall are required to enter and traverse the displays in single file (Wakeman 1988; Wagner 1992).

<sup>4</sup>There is a tremendous literature on the multiplicities of Chinese nationalism in the post-Mao era (roughly late 1970s–today). See e.g. Unger 1996; Pan et. al. 2005; Dittmer and Kim 1993; Wei and Liu 2002; Zhao 2004; Gries 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Exceptions include Brownell 1995; Lozada 2006, and several studies on ethnicity and nationalism in China, e.g., Schein 2000; Gladney 2004.

<sup>6</sup>Little Red Pioneer groups do participate in other state “parades,” particularly on National Day on October 1st, but filming a mass induction into the Pioneers on International Children’s Day was unique (Wu 2005).

<sup>7</sup>The Pioneers came out of CCP experiments with children’s groups in the 1930s, when these qualities were first identified and various institutional forms for inculcating them were first developed (Unger 1982; Woronov n.d.).

<sup>8</sup>See Unger 1982 for a discussion of the changing constitution of “appropriate class background” for Pioneer—and, later, Red Guard—membership.

<sup>9</sup>In 1978, the Chinese leadership officially declared that class struggle in China had come to an end.

<sup>10</sup>Falun Gong is a quasi-religious group established in the early 1990s by charismatic leader Li Hongzhi that espouses a set of meditation practices. The PRC government banned the group in 1999, labeling it an “evil cult.”

<sup>11</sup>Lei Feng was an extremely important Cultural Revolution-era model for selfless socialist morality, love of the Party and the nation, and devotion to the Party. His image and example are still used in China today (see Farquhar 2002; Landsberger 2001).

<sup>12</sup>This drawing of “unclean” food sold to unsuspecting children by “dirty” migrant workers indexes the complex relationships between local Beijingers and the growing migrant population. See Woronov 2004.

<sup>13</sup>I thank Char Mackley for her help with this argument.



<sup>14</sup>In Beijing public schools, each grade's teachers share an office space, where they prepare classes and correct homework.

<sup>15</sup>The expression "I'm back!" (*Wo huilai le!*) had been widely used in public service announcements that year to celebrate the return of Macao to the Chinese motherland.

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